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NSC BRIEFING

31 March 1954

THE MILITARY SITUATION IN TONKIN

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[redacted] a major assault on Dien Bien Phu will occur by 5 April. The Viet Minh is expected to take advantage of the dark of the moon, and the period of greatest darkness will begin on 2 April.

Viet Minh forces there apparently have completed most of their preparations for an attack. Trenches have approached to within 50 yards of some French positions and now form a maze completely around the central complex. Strongpoint Isabelle to the south is virtually surrounded by this trench system. Our army attaché in Hanoi reports that recent photos show present entrenchments on a far greater scale and much closer than those around Gabrielle and Beatrice prior to the enemy's successful attacks there. Aerial reconnaissance shows a significant build-up of close-in artillery and mortar positions.

Although every indication points to an imminent attack, General Navarre has suggested the possibility that the enemy may choose instead a prolonged "smothering action." In this case, continued artillery and mortar harassment of the French positions could be expected, together with intensified efforts to knock out French air support and thus deny supplies to the bastion.

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Meanwhile, [redacted] about 13,000 enemy troops -- presumably recent recruits which had been undergoing training -- are moving from the southwest and north of the Tonkin delta to reinforce at Dien Bien Phu. Their arrival there would raise enemy strength to about 47,500.

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DIA review(s) completed.

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The Viet Minh is continuing to move supplies into the Dien Bien Phu area.

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The problem of evacuating French casualties grows more serious daily. The daily rate of wounded is about 70. Some of the casualties are ambulatory and can be treated locally, but the rate of seriously wounded still exceeds evacuation capabilities, and at last report there were 90 cases requiring urgent evacuation. General Navarre doubts that his radio appeals to the Viet Minh for safe passage for ambulance planes will be honored. He believes that the enemy hopes thus to make him yield for humanitarian reasons, but he states that even 3,000 casualties would not make him do so.

Our service attachés in Saigon stated on 26 March their combined opinion as of that date was that the French can and will hold at Dien Bien Phu. They believed that strength-wise and defensively the French were in a good position, and that their margin of superiority when the attack came would be in air support. They pointed out, however, that good flying weather remained an important factor.

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In the Tonkin delta, [REDACTED]  
all major units formerly outside the defense perimeter have now infiltrated. This would bring Viet Minh regular strength there to about 20,000, whereas several weeks ago it was in the neighborhood of 13,000. In addition, an estimated 55,000 irregular troops are there, whose quality and capabilities often approach those of the regulars.

The rail and highway communications between Haiphong and Hanoi have been a major target in recent weeks and the flow of supplies has been seriously disrupted. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Ambushes of French Union troops are a daily routine, and these with other guerrilla and sabotage tactics are expected to increase.

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